The Doctor's Wife

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

"Give me the light, girl, and don't bother," Mr. Sleaford said. "I've been worried this day until my head's all of a muddle. Don't stand staring at me, child! Tell your mother I've got some work to do and mayn't go to bed all night."

"You've been worried, pa?"

"Yes, and I don't want to be bothered by stupid questions, now I've got home."

Isabel came in, looking very grave, and sat down. George saw that all pleasure was over that night.

If Mr. Sleaford had business which required to be done, he seemed in no great hurry to begin his work, for the heavy footsteps trampled up and down, up and down the floor overhead.

It seemed to George Gilbert as if Mr. Sleaford walked up and down his room all night, and long after the early daylight shone through his dingy window curtains. George was not surprised, therefore, when he was told at breakfast next morning that his host had not yet risen, and was not likely to appear for some hours. Isabel had to go on some mysterious mission, and George overheard fragments of a whispered conversation between the young lady and her mother in the passage outside the parlor door in which the words "summonses" and "silver spoons" and "interest" figured several times.

Mrs. Sleaford was busy about the house and the boys were scattered, so George and Sigismund took their breakfast comfortably together. Sigismund made a plan for the day. He would take a holiday for once in a way, he said, and would escort his friend to divers picture galleries, and would crown the day's enjoyment by a dinner.

The two young men left the house at 11 o'clock. They had seen nothing of Isabel that morning, nor of the master of the house. All that George Gilbert knew of that gentleman was the fact that Mr. Sleaford had a heavy footstep and a deep, sulky voice. If George had seen the barrister! If these two men had met each other face to face!

Somehow or other, George was glad when it was time to go home. It was only 7 o'clock as yet, and the sun was shining on the fountains as the young men went across the square. They hoped being in time to get a cup of tea before Mrs. Sleaford let the fire out; for that lady had an aggravating trick of letting out the kitchen fire at half past 7 or 8 o'clock on summer evenings.

When they came to the wooden door in the garden wall, Sigismund Smith stooped down and gave his usual whistle at the keyhole; but he looked up suddenly and cried:

"Well, I'm blest!"

"What's the matter?"

"The door's open."

Mr. Smith pushed it as he spoke, and the two young men went into the front garden.

"In all the time I've lived with the Sleafords, that never happened before," said Sigismund. "Mr. Sleaford's awfully particular about the gate being kept locked. He says the neighborhood's a queer one, and you never know what thieves are hanging about the place!"

The door of the house, as well as that of the garden, was open; Sigismund went into the hall, followed closely by George. The parlor door was open, and the room was empty, and it had an abnormal appearance of tidiness, as if all the litter and rubbish had been suddenly scrambled together and carried away. There was a scrap of old frayed rope upon the table, lying side by side with some tin-tacks, a hammer, and a couple of blank luggage labels.

George did not stop to look at these; he went straight to the open window and looked out into the garden. He had so fully expected to see Isabel sitting under the pear tree with a novel in her lap that he started and drew back with an exclamation of surprise at finding the garden empty; the place seemed so strangely blank without the girlish figure lolling in the basket chair. It was as if George Gilbert had been familiar with that garden for the last ten years, and had never seen it without seeing Isabel in her accustomed place.

"I suppose Miss Sleaford—I suppose they're all out," the surgeon said, rather dolefully.

"I suppose they are out," Sigismund answered, looking about him with a puzzled air; "and yet that's strange. They don't often go out, at least all at once. They seldom go out at all, in fact, except on errands. I'll call the girl."

He opened the door and looked into the front parlor before going to carry out his design, and he started back upon the threshold as if he had seen a ghost.

"What is it?" cried George.

"My luggage and your portmanteau, all packed and corded; look!"

Mr. Smith pointed, as he spoke, to a couple of trunks, a hat box, a carpet bag and a portmanteau, piled in a heap in the center of the room. He spoke loudly in his surprise, and the maid-of-all-work came in with her cap hanging by a single hairpin to a knob of tumbled hair.

"Oh, sir!" she said, "they're all gone; they went at 6 o'clock this evenin'; and they've gone to California, missus says; and she packed all your things, and she thinks you'd better have 'em took round to the grocer's immediant, for fear of being seized for the rent, but you was to sleep in the house to-night, if you pleased, and your friend likewise; and I was to get your breakfast in the morning before I take the key round to the landlord."

"Gone away!" said Sigismund; "gone away!"

"Yes, sir, every one of 'em, and the boys was so pleased that they would go shoutin' 'ooray, 'ooray, all over the garding, though Mr. Sleaford scolded at 'em awful, and did hurry and tear so, I thought he was a-goin' mad. But Miss Isabel, she cried about goin' so sudden, and seemed all pale and frightened like. And there's a letter on the chimbley-piece, please, which she put it there."

Sigismund pounced upon the letter, and tore it open. George read it over his friend's shoulder. It was only two lines:

"Dear Mr. Smith—Don't think hardly of us for going away so suddenly. Papa says it must be so. Yours, ever faithfully, ISABEL."

"I should like to keep that letter," George said, blushing up to the roots of his hair. "Miss Sleaford writes a pretty hand."

CHAPTER IV.

The two young men acted very promptly upon that friendly warning conveyed in Miss Sleaford's farewell message. The maid-of-all-work went to the grocer's and returned in company with a dirty-looking boy and a truck. He piled the trunks, portmanteaus and carpet bag on the truck, and departed with his load, which was to be kept until the next morning, when Sigismund was to take the luggage away in a cab. When this business had all been arranged, Mr. Smith and his friend went out into the garden and talked of the surprise that had fallen upon them.

"I always knew they were thinking of leaving," Sigismund said, "but I never thought they'd go away like this. I feel quite cut up about it, George. I'd got to like them, you know, old boy, and to feel as if I was one of the family."

George seemed to take the matter quite as seriously as his friend, though his acquaintance with the Sleafords was little more than four-and-twenty hours old.

"They must have known before to-day that they were going," he said. "People don't go to California at a few hours' notice."

Sigismund summoned the maid and the two young men subjected her to a very rigorous cross examination, but she could tell them very little more than she had told them in the first instance.

"Mr. Sleaford 'ad 'is breakfast at nigh upon 1 o'clock, and then he went out, and he come tearin' 'ome agen in one of these 'ansom cabs 3 o'clock in the afternoon; and he told missus to send a four-wheeler from the first stand he passed at 6 o'clock precise; and the best part of the luggage was sent round to the green grocer's on a truck, and the rest was took on the roof of the cab, and Mr. Sleaford he didn't go in the cab, but walked off as cool as possible, swinging his stick and 'olding his 'ead as 'igh as hever."

Sigismund asked the girl if she had heard the address given to the cabman who took the family away.

"No," the girl said; "Mr. Sleaford had given no address."

Mr. Smith's astonishment knew no bounds. He walked about the deserted house, and up and down the weedy pathways, until long after summer moon was bright upon the lawn, and every trailing branch and tender leaflet threw its sharp separate shadow on the shining ground.

"I never heard of such a thing in all my life," the young author cried; 'it's like my stories. With exception of their going away in a four-wheeler cab instead of through a sliding panel and subterranean passage, it's for all the world like them."

"But you'll be able to find out where they's gone, and why they went away so suddenly," suggested George Gilbert; "some of their friends will be able to tell you."

"Friends!" exclaimed Sigismund; "they never had any friends—at least not friends that they visited, or anything of that kind."

They went into the house, and wandered from room to room, looking blankly at the chairs and tables, the open drawers, the disordered furniture, as if from those inanimate objects they might obtain some clew to the little domestic mystery that bewildered them. Everywhere there were traces of disorder and hurry, except in Mr. Sleaford's room. That sanctuary was wide open now, and Mr. Smith and his friend went into it and examined it. To Sigismund a newly excavated chamber in a long-buried city could scarcely have been more interesting. Here there was no evidence of reckless haste. There was not a single fragment of waste paper in any one of the half dozen open drawers on either side of the desk. There was not so much as an old envelope upon the floor. A great heap of gray ashes upon the cold hearthstone revealed the fact that Mr. Seaford had employed himself in destroying papers before his hasty departure.

CHAPTER V.

Before leaving the city George obtained a promise from his friend, Sigismund Smith. Whatever tidings Mr. Smith should at any time hear about the Sleafords he was to communicate immediately to the young surgeon of Graybridge.

George Gilbert's last words had relation to this subject; and all the way home he kept debating in his mind whether it was likely the Sleafords had really gone to California, or whether the idea had been merely thrown out with a view to the mystification of the irate landlord.

"I hope that foolish Sigismund won't meet Miss Sleaford again," George thought, very gravely; "he might be silly enough to marry her, and I'm sure she'd never make a good wife for any man."

Early in the following spring the young man received a letter from his friend, Mr. Smith. Sigismund wrote very discursively about his own prospects and schemes, and gave his friend a brief synopsis of the romance he had just begun. George skimmed lightly enough over this part of the letter; but as he turned the leaf by and by, he saw a name that brought the blood to his face. He was vexed with himself for that involuntary blush, and sorely puzzled to know why he should be so startled by an unexpected sight of Isabel Sleaford's name.

"You made me promise to tell you anything that turned up about the Sleaford's," Sigismund wrote. "You'll be very much surprised to hear that Miss Sleaford came to me the other day here in my chambers, and asked me if I could help her in any way to get her living. She wanted me to recommend her as a nursery governess, or something of that kind, if I knew of any family in want of such a person. She was staying with a sister of her stepmother, she told me; but she couldn't be a burden on her any longer. Mrs. Sleaford and the boys have gone to live in Texas. Poor Sleaford is dead. You'll be as much astonished as I was to hear this. Isabel did not tell me this at first; but I saw that she was dressed in black, and when I asked her about her father she burst out crying and sobbed as if her heart would break. I should like to have ascertained what the poor fellow died of and all about it—for Sleaford was not an old man, and one of the most powerful looking fellows I ever saw—but I could not torture Izzie with questions while she was in such a state of grief and agitation. 'I'm very sorry you've lost your father, my dear Miss Sleaford,' I said; and she sobbed out something that I scarcely heard, and I got her some cold water to drink, and it was ever so long before she came round again, and was able to talk to me. Well, I couldn't think of anybody that was likely to help her that day; but I took the address of her aunt's house and promised to call upon her there in a day or two. I wrote by that day's post to my mother, and asked her if she could help me; and she wrote back by return of mail to tell me that my uncle, Charles Raymond, at Conventford, was in want of just such a person as Miss Sleaford (of course I had endowed Isabel with all the virtues under the sun), and if I really thought Miss S. would suit, and I could answer for the perfect responsibility of her connections and antecedents—it isn't to be supposed that I was going to say anything about rent, or that I should own that Isabel's antecedents were lolling in a garden-chair reading novels, or going on suspicious errands to the jeweler—why, I was to engage Miss S. at one hundred dollars a year salary. I went that very afternoon, although I was a number and a half behind with 'The Demon of the Galleys' ('The D. of the G.' is a sequel to 'The Brand upon the Shoulderblade;') and the poor girl began to cry when I told her I'd found a home for her.

"I'm afraid she's had a great deal of trouble since the Sleafords left Camberwell, for she isn't at all the girl she was. Her step-mother's sister is a vulgar woman who lets lodgings, and there's only one servant—such a miserable slavey; and Isabel went to the door three times while I was there. You know my Uncle Raymond, and you know what a dear jolly fellow he is, so you may guess the change will be a very pleasant one for poor Izzie. By the bye, you might call and see her the first time you're in Conventford, and write me a word how the poor child gets on. I thought she seemed a little frightened of the idea of going among strangers. I saw her off the day before yesterday. She went by the train; and I put her in charge of a most respectable family going all the way through, with six children, and a bird-cage and a dog, and a pack of cards to play upon a tea-tray on account of the train being slow."

Mr. Gilbert read this part of his friend's letter three times before he was able to realize the news contained in it. Mr. Sleaford dead, and Isabel settled as a nursery-governess at Conventford! If the winding Wayverne had overflowed its sedgy banks, the young surgeon could have been scarcely more surprised than he was by the contents of his friend's letter. Isabel at Conventford—within eleven miles of him at that moment, as he walked up and down the little room, with his hair tumbled all about his flushed, good-looking face, and Sigismund's letter in his pocket.

What was it to him that Isabel Sleaford was so near? What was she to him that he should think of her, or be fluttered by the thought that she was within his reach? What did he know of her? Only that she had eyes that were unlike any other eyes he had ever looked at; eyes that haunted his memory like strange stars seen in a feverish dream. He knew nothing of her but this; and that she had a pretty, sentimental manner, a pensive softness in her voice, and sudden flights and capricious changes of expression, that had filled his mind with wonder.

(To be continued.)

BORN AN EXPLORER.

Commander Peary Has Had the Fever Since Boyhood.

A man who set out to reach the north pole should know how to endure hardships, and Commander Peary long ago began to learn. A prominent citizen of Maine, himself a lover of outdoor life, relates that when Peary was a young man it was a common thing for him to take "a camping outfit of a blanket and a lunch" and start for the mountains bordering upon Maine and New Hampshire.

There, alone, he would pass days exploring ravines, ledges and the deep, secluded spots, cooking his own meals and feasting upon the trout with which the streams abounded. He never built a camp; he simply rolled himself in a blanket to sleep, but he would come out brown and hardy.

On one of these occasions he had taken a canoe to the head waters of Cold river, and after passing a few days, came down the Saco, and stopped at about 5 o'clock for a word with those in my camp. We expected to have the pleasure of his company for the night, thinking that he would welcome hearty meals and a good bed. But "No," he said. "I never sleep indoors when on these trips."

It was a cold, windy November night but he bade us goodby and went down the river. The next morning, beside a stone wall, we found his camping place. A few smoky embers told us where he had cooked his breakfast, and a spot on the grass 6½ feet long and free from white frost showed us where he had slept.

AN APT CONJUROR.

How a Little Ruse Saved Him from Probable Death at Morocco.

The troubles of France over the Moroccan question recall the difficulty into which a French conjurer got at Fez in the time of the late sultan. He was wandering about the country, meeting with great success among the Moors, when the sultan heard of his skill and immediately sent for him to Fez. He was commanded to perform before the court and the trick which met with most success was that of the two pigeons.

The conjurer produced a couple of pigeons, one white and the other black, and, cutting off their heads, placed the head of the white pigeon in the neck of the black one and liberated the two birds, who flew about the sultan, who was much taken with this trick and at once sent for two magnificent slaves, one white and the other black, and ordered the unhappy man to perform the trick on them.

The conjurer knew that to refuse would mean his own death, but he was equal to the occasion. He declared that he could do the trick easily, but that the magic weapons he had with him were not strong enough for two such big men. He therefore asked leave to go and fetch the necessary tools, promising to return and perform the trick in a few days' time.

As soon as he got to the coast he set sail for France and took particular care never to go near Morocco again.

Worst Feature of It.

Sillicus—It is positively sinful for a girl to encourage a fellow when she has no intention of marrying him.

Cynicus—Yes; she might change her mind.—Philadelphia Record.

Victim of His Own Curiosity.

He—At what age do you think a girl ought to marry?

She—Well, I couldn't think of setting the day before next October, George, when I shall be just 20.